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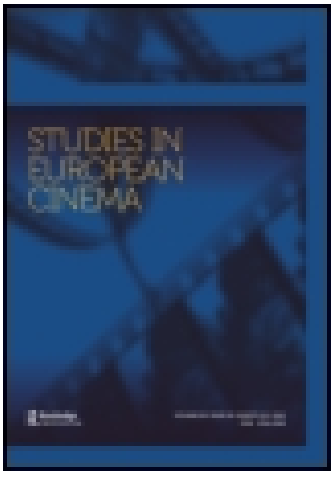

Studies in European Cinema
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rseu20

The new Eve: Faith, femininity and the fairy tale in Catherine Breillat's Barbe bleue/Bluebeard (2009)

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Published online: 06 Jan 2014.

To cite this article: Catherine Wheatley (2013) The new Eve: Faith, femininity and the fairy tale in Catherine Breillat's Barbe bleue/Bluebeard (2009), Studies in European Cinema, 10:1, 71-80

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1386/seci.10.1.71_1

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Studies in European Cinema
Volume 10 Number 1
© 2013 Intellect Ltd Article. English language. doi: 10.1386/seci.10.1.71_1

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The new Eve: Faith, femininity and the fairy tale in Catherine Breillat's *Barbe bleue/Bluebeard* (2009)

ABSTRACT

If previous variants on the Bluebeard myth can be seen as what Marina Warner has termed 'a version of the Fall in which Eve is allowed to get away with it' (1995), Catherine Breillat's 2009 adaptation of Charles Perrault's fairy tales sees Barbe bleue as Eve, *his young bride, 'the serpent in the garden' (Wheatley 2010: 42). Unlike previous retellings of the Bluebeard myth by female voices such as Angela Carter's 1979 'The Bloody Chamber' and Marie-Jeanne L'Héritier's 1694 'The Subtle Princess', then, Breillat's* Barbe bleue *does not focus on making explicit the narrative of abusive male privilege and female vindication within the fairy tale. Instead, it takes the children's story as the starting point for an examination of sexuality and selfhood in relation to the foundational myths that fairy tales provide.*

*This article argues that for Breillat, these stories endure because they provide social values and moral lessons which resonate through time, an approach mirrored in the ambiguous incorporation of Christian iconography and myth in her film. It is a gestural attitude (to borrow from Agamben), which is likewise suggested by a number of other film-makers working in contemporary Europe, including Mia Hansen-Løve (*Le père de mes enfants*, 2009), and Jessica Hausner (*Lourdes*, 2009).*

KEYWORDS

Catherine Breillat
Barbe bleue (2009)
fairy tales
Christianity
Bluebeard
feminism

INTRODUCTION: ONCE UPON A TIME …

In the context of a journal issue dedicated to women's film-making in France since the turn of the century, Catherine Breillat needs little introduction. After all, the release of her 1999 feature film *Romance* arguably marked a seminal moment in European film history, ushering in not only the movement now dubbed the 'New Extremism',[1] but also opening the doors for a new generation of female directors. Indeed, this is the woman who led the stand-off regarding Virginie Despentes and Coralie Trinh-Thi's *Baise-Moi* (2000), literally rallying her film-making sisters to the cause:[2] the very fact that an entire journal issue can now easily be given over to the subject of female film-makers working in France today can perhaps be attributed to Breillat's efforts. After a hundred years of being overlooked, or at best reduced to a tokenistic solo girl amongst all those boys (the names of Germaine Dulac, Agnès Varda and Marguerite Duras are amongst those that spring naturally to mind here), women's film-making has finally awoken from its slumber. Is it going too far to see Breillat as the good fairy in this tale, one who roused the sleeping beauty – and did it, without even needing the help of a handsome prince? Perhaps, but she can be credited with working a little magic nonetheless.

The aim of this article is not, however, to champion Breillat as a ground-breaker, nor to rehearse the well-trodden debates regarding whether or not she can be read as a 'feminist' film-maker – a label to which Breillat herself takes strong exception.[3] I will focus on her 2009 film *Barbe bleue* not in terms of Breillat's authorial signature – although that subject will inevitably arise over the course of my discussion – but in relation to an alliterative set of structuring themes: films, fairy tales, femininity and, finally, faith, or, to be precise, the Christian faith. For there is a curious series of visual and thematic references which occur within Breillat's adaptation of Charles Perrault's story of a murderous husband and his incautious bride, and it is to a large extent the aim of this article to inquire as to what their significance might be. In a concluding section, I will make some suggestions as to how, just as *Romance* served as a starting point for this past decade of film-making, so ten years later *Barbe bleue* might be the representative of wider developments emerging in contemporary European film.

FAIRY TALES

Before examining Breillat's film in detail, some history of the Bluebeard story is necessary. The first written version of the tale is credited to Charles Perrault, and it is this version – only ten pages long but, as Ginette Vincendeau (2010: 50) describes it, 'one of the most gory and frightening of all fairytales' – that Breillat bases her story on. Just so, it is this version – in its new English translation by Christopher Betts – from which all future citations of the literary version are taken. But Perrault is far from the 'owner' of the Bluebeard myth, inasmuch as it refers to the story of the serial murderer of wives, and thus marries, quite literally, violence with sex. Oral variants have been traced to various cultures across the globe, from North Africa to the deep South of the United States of America, while it has been speculated that Perrault's version itself was inspired by the life of fifteenth-century nobleman Gilles de Rais (see, e.g., Vincendeau 2010: 50). At the other end of the spectrum are the innumerable adaptations of and allusions to Perrault's tale across a range of media, from Brontë's *Jane Eyre* to Bartók's *Bluebeard's Castle*.[4] In film, the story has a rich and illustrious history: the first adaptation, which saw the eponymous

1. See, for example, Tanya Horeck and Tina Kendall (2011).
2. Despentes and Trinh-Thi's film was the subject of a censorship scandal, which resulted in Breillat organizing both a petition and a demonstration protesting its effective classification as pornography. For a fuller description of events, see Lilian Mathieu (2003/4).
3. For a neat synthesis of many of these debates, see Wilson (2001).
4. It is impossible within an article of this length to enumerate the tens – if not hundreds – of works that have been inspired by the Bluebeard myth, and so those referenced within this article are versions which, for me, have a particular pertinence to Breillat's version. For those interested in further iterations, a useful starting point is the website 'Sur la Lune', which offers a more comprehensive list of Bluebeard adaptations. http://www.surlalunefairytales.com/bluebeard/themes.html Last accessed 3 September 2011.

villain's victims hung out to dry like washing on a line, was produced in 1901 (at the very birth of cinema) by none other than Georges Méliès. Later versions have come from Michael Powell, Edgar G. Ulmer and – arguably – Charlie Chaplin and Claude Chabrol, whose riffs on the real-life story of the notorious early-twentieth-century murderer Henri Landru, dubbed Bluebeard by the French press, drew heavily on the iconography of Perrault's tale. Each of these versions transforms the legend in the telling, and puts different weighting on its male and female characters. They have been read, variously and by turns, through the lenses of folklore (Wilson 1899), Freudianism (Bettelheim 1978) and feminism (Warner 1995).

It is the latter approach that one would expect to sit most comfortably with Breillat's film. Within feminist readings the story has frequently been interpreted as an allegory of sexual initiation – Bluebeard's young bride enters the forbidden chamber where the bodies of his former wives are kept and her loss of innocence is marked by the 'stained' key she drops in the blood of these women; this is, of course, a favourite theme of Breillat's. So too is childbirth, and Griselda Pollock is amongst several female critics who have suggested that the blood-soaked closet symbolizes women dying in childbirth (Pollock and Anderson 2009: xxvi). Meanwhile the tale's central dynamic – between a character whose very name, as Warner states, 'stirs up associations with sex, virility, male readiness and desire' (1995: 241) and a curious, virginal adolescent woman – is one that we have already seen at work countless times in Breillat's films. And yet Breillat's *Barbe bleue* does something with the Bluebeard myth that is rather different from other female variants on the formula, which go much further in their attempts to make visible its implicit gender politics.

FEMINISTS

Margaret Atwood's 1983 short story 'Bluebeard's Egg', for example, and her 1992 piece 'Alien Territory' (part of the *Good Bones* anthology) both offer a contemporary update on the perils of female curiosity and the power of knowledge. Angela Carter's 1979 rewrite, 'The Bloody Chamber', is a masterly study of female desire, given a feminist slant by the replacement of the avenging avatars of patriarchy – the brothers of Bluebeard's young bride – with her widowed mother. Artist Cindy Sherman has illustrated a version of the story, the Grimm Brothers' 'Fitcher's Bird', with ghoulish, fragmented, highly lit photographs, which, harking back to Méliès, portray the dead former wives as anonymous, waxwork figures. (And it is an image reprised by Breillat's almost abstract composition of the three hanging women – one blonde, one brunette, one red-haired, hanging in parallel, a pool of fresh blood surrounding them but the beauty of their pale, lifeless faces perfectly unmarred.) Poet Anne Sexton transforms the young heroine into a 16-year-old boy; her own poems become the secret behind the door. Meanwhile the French-trained, British-based visual artist Alice Anderson has filmed a short version of Bluebeard which tips gender completely on its head, featuring an all-female cast yet replacing the virgin bride with an adolescent male apprentice for the bluebearded anti-heroine.

Atwood's surrealist modern-day updates (in 'Alien Territory' the young bride finds her husband's ex-wives folded up in the 'linen closet, neatly cut up and ironed flat and folded' (1993: 77)), Carter's baroque fantasy and Sherman's and Anderson's gender-bending twists on the tale each make explicit the narrative of abusive male privilege and female vindication within Perrault's

fairy tale. So, too, does Jane Campion's *The Piano* (1993) – a film in which the bloodied key is neatly transformed from metal to ebony, and which directly references Perrault's Bluebeard in a sequence showing an amateur production of the story in a local school hall. Like Breillat's starkly realistic version, which calls to mind such naturalistic pieces as Robert Bresson's *Lancelot du Lac* (1974) and Éric Rohmer's *Les amours d'Astrée et de Céladon/The Romance of Astrea and Celadon* (2007) with its simple, pared-back aesthetic, *The Piano* reinstates the story to its still relevant social and economic roots. If fairy tales are analogies of real-life situations, then Campion and Breillat analogize fairy tales through the use of realism: making it clear that in both the cases of *The Piano*'s Ada and *Barbe bleue*'s Marie-Catherine, marriage to the monster is not primarily a matter of romance so much as of survival, and that they are in effect brokered off by their father and mother, respectively.

However, unlike Marie-Catherine, Ada is typical of feminist Bluebeard heroines in that the film depicts her marriage as an initiatory journey, out of which she emerges wiser and stronger, liberated from her captivity and from her complicity with it. As Elaine Jordan (1990: 130) puts it, these adaptations relentlessly detail 'the ways in which women can be complicit with what captivates and victimises them, even or especially in their adventurousness'. From this, Cristina Bacchilega (1997: 138) is led to conclude that the moral of these stories is that we must recognize these ways in order to 'change what we desire'. In keeping with Perrault's original ending, these wives become 'mistresses' of all their dead husbands' riches. But more significant perhaps is their subsequent journey in the footsteps of that first widow, who used these riches 'to marry herself a man of true worth, with whom she forgot all about the bad time she had had with Bluebeard' (Perrault 2009: 113). Thus Marina Warner's (1995: 244) claim that Bluebeard, and its variants, offers

> a version of the Fall: Bluebeard acts like God the father – prohibiting knowledge – the forbidden chamber is the tree of the knowledge of good and evil – and the bride is Eve, the woman who disobeys and through curiosity, endangers her life,

concludes with the contention that in this version, Eve is allowed to get away with it, and no one heaps the blame on Pandora.

If Breillat's film reiterates this trope of the Bluebeard myth, it is, as was perhaps to be expected, with a twist in the (fairy) tale. The director claims that in her version, it is not the virgin bride Marie-Catherine who serves as a stand-in for Eve. 'In the Torah', she states, 'Eve gives Adam the apple and gives him the opportunity to commit original sin. In my version of the story, Bluebeard is Eve, and Marie-Catherine is Adam' (Wheatley 2010: 42).[5] For Breillat, then, Bluebeard's guilt lies not with the murders of his wives but with his inability to *not* show his young bride that terrible key, and the terrible door which it opens. The story is not one of wifely disobedience, but obedience: prohibition itself demands transgression. Nonetheless, this role reversal does not free Bluebeard's bride of the Biblical taint of perfidy. Rather the exchange ensures that in Breillat's version no one gets away with anything. Bluebeard seals his own fate: finishing the film beheaded at the hands of the *deus ex machina* of two musketeers who arrive at the last moment to save Marie-Catherine's life. If he is Eve, then he is duly punished for his sins. But while Marie-Catherine may survive, hers is far from a happy ending: in the film's final, static shot, she is seen resting her hand on the severed head of

5. Breillat's reference to the Torah here raises a salient point, which is that the Fall is a part of both Jewish and Christian mythology. My positioning of it as a more-or-less straightforwardly Old Testament, Christian Biblical reference might thus be seen as somewhat problematic. However, it is my argument that such a reading is consistent with the wider context of Christian symbolism and allusion in *Barbe bleue*, which also draws on the New Testament.

her husband, gazing rather sorrowfully into the middle distance. Suddenly she resolves, like Salome, into a foolish and frivolous temptress, playing little girl's games whose consequences are far more serious than she may have imagined. Tellingly, although Breillat introduces a potential replacement husband – the good man rather than the bad one – he is nowhere to be seen at the end of the film, and one suspects that the pretty, bland boy would be a poor substitute for the hulking mass of her dead husband.

We will return to the image of Salome presently. Before doing so, however, the image of the Fall deserves perhaps a little more consideration. For one could argue that *Barbe bleue* makes explicit a theme that in fact runs throughout a great many of Breillat's films. Time and again her protagonists fall victim to sexual temptation – and the knowledge it brings – and as a result find themselves cast out of Eden. In *Une vieille maîtresse*/*The Last Mistress* (2007), Ryno's betrayal of Hermangarde with Vellini sees the pair not only exiled from polite society but ultimately destroyed. In *Anatomie de l'enfer*/*Anatomy of Hell* (2004), which could be seen in its entirety as quite straightforwardly enacting the story of the Fall, a man is offered the opportunity to share a woman's knowledge, ending in her possible death and his emotional and psychological upheaval. Breillat's follow-up film to *Barbe bleue*, an adaptation of Perrault's 'The Sleeping Beauty in the Wood' (and Hans Christian Andersen's 'The Snow Queen'), climaxes in the heroine's romantic disillusionment when she finally sacrifices her virginity to her knight in shining armour, emerging intact but nonetheless jaded, her youthful idealism completely destroyed. And the notion of the fallen woman is perhaps most painfully and frequently embodied in the characters played by Roxanne Mesquida, cast as a naive young virgin in three of Breillat's films and twice paying the ultimate price for her newfound knowledge.

Indeed, the fate of Elena, Mesquida's character in *À Ma Soeur!* (2001), might be indirectly linked to that of Marie-Catherine in *Barbe bleue*. Having lost her virginity to a local Lothario during a family holiday, she is travelling home – the vacation having been brought to a premature close as a result of her indiscretions – along with her mother and younger sister Anaïs when the three women are attacked by an anonymous assailant. While Anaïs is spared, Elena and her mother are brutally murdered. Since the triptych is repeated in *Barbe bleue* – single mother; pouty, posturing and rather worldly eldest child; awkward and altogether more childlike younger sibling – it might not be too much of a stretch to see Elena and her mother as Bluebeard's former wives, especially given the frequency with which all three victims are cast as sisters in variants on the Bluebeard tale such as the Grimms' 'Fitcher's Bird'.

Of course, those familiar with Breillat's films will know that the sister relationship is always configured as ambivalent within her cinematic universe: here no less than elsewhere. Upon becoming engaged to Bluebeard, Marie-Catherine flaunts her new-found wealth in front of her older, more classically beautiful sister Anne, parading her scarlet wedding gown before her. (In fact there is an implication that Marie-Catherine's motivation for the marriage might well be the opportunity to gazump Anne, the more obvious choice as Bluebeard's bride.) Breillat's framing device – which, seemingly set in the early 1950s, sees another pair of young girls reading the story aloud – sees this ongoing tension acted out here, too. Intermittently breaking off from Perrault's tale, the pair verbally squabble ('You're jealous.' / 'Of what?' / 'Of me.'), while physically nuzzling, grooming, and stroking one another. It is in this parallel narrative that the Fall finds its most literal visualization: in tempting her older

sister, Marie-Anne, to enter the attic and read, against her better judgement, the tale that terrifies her, Catherine inadvertently sets in motion events that will lead Marie-Anne to plummet through an open trapdoor to her death.[6]

I will return to this framing device in my concluding section, but there is yet another set of sisters inscribed within the diegesis of *Barbe bleue* which also bears attention. These are the sisters – as in nuns – who run the convent where we first meet Marie-Catherine and Anne, from out of which they are cast when their father dies and the extent of his debts is revealed. This death in fact prompts another exit from Eden, another new form of knowledge and experience acquired, that of loss and grief, and of poverty: the girls do not only lose their father and their education, but their income, family furniture and eventually food. As in Campion's film, there is a political point to be made here in terms of gender, power and class relations, but we might equally note that this is perhaps the real beginning of Marie-Catherine's ascent (or descent?) in adulthood, the social-economic fall prefiguring the sexual one. Before Marie-Catherine betrays her husband, she is herself betrayed by her father (who leaves her impoverished) and by her sisters – who throw her out of the convent when her family can no longer afford the fees.

FAITH

This convent-set prologue is a completely original addition in Breillat's otherwise very faithful adaptation of Perrault's tale, one for which I can find no antecedents in any other written or filmed versions, and it opens out onto a set of questions regarding Christian imagery. For the addition of the convent scene is not the only reference to Catholicism within the film, nor is it even the most striking – as that indelible image of Marie-Catherine presiding over her dead husband's head makes only too clear.

What then, if any, is the significance of Christian iconography within this film? Merely an oblique reference point in Breillat's work hitherto, why does it suddenly crystallize within this adaptation? An initial answer might lie in the tale itself. Certainly Angela Carter also appeals to religious imagery within her adaptation of Perrault's tale, as Cristina Bacchilega insightfully reveals in her analysis of the story (1997: 124–26). Bacchilega points out that the bride's words make the marquis not simply a being favoured by God – 'On his arm, all eyes were upon me. The whispering crowd parted like the Red Sea to let us through' (Carter 1979: 10) – but also a deity himself: 'The light caught the fire opal on my hand so that it flashed, once, with a baleful light, as if to tell me that the eye of God – his eye – was upon me' (29). Carter, like Breillat, evokes convents ('he called me his little nun' (17)) and the language of sacrifice (her heroine is 'a penitent' (27), who lets her husband 'matyrise' her hair (19); the young bride views the tarnished key as the 'mark of Cain' (36), a reflection of her 'shame' (41).

In Carter's narrative though, the husband, whether he is seen as God or the Devil, seems to hold absolute power, casting the bride as his Saint Cecilia. Within her retrospective first-person narration, religious representation offers both a foolproof representation of the heroine's innocence and virtue and, as Bacchilega puts it, 'a readily available ideological refuge or mask which still seduces women into victimhood' (1997: 126). This is far from the case in Breillat's film, which, albeit critical of Christianity in its opening moments, makes an effort to trouble its ideological binaries, instead placing them in a perambulatory relationship to one another. Indeed,

6. This meta-textual framing device used by Breillat has curious overlaps with what is perhaps the most recent Bluebeard adaptation (at the time of writing, at least): Helen Oyeyemi's *Mr Fox*, which likewise examines the telling and reading of fairy tales, as well as the tales themselves.

despite her claim that Bluebeard is Eve, Breillat more frequently casts her anti-hero in the role of saint than sinner. That closing shot of his decapitation is matched by an opening shot of the murdered John the Baptist, his head resting, like Bluebeard's, on a platter. It is echoed in a long shot of the nuptial feast, with Bluebeard seated – somewhat surprisingly – in the position of Christ. Framed in this Christian context, he and Marie-Catherine seem to be constantly switching roles between martyr and traitor, Jesus and Judas, with Bluebeard more often than not assuming the role of the former. Clearly, Breillat's treatment of Christianity is more complex, and less overtly metaphorical than Carter's – or indeed its precedents. For if, as Bacchilega suggests, Carter's use of religious metaphor simply reactivates a long-standing Christian dimension to Bluebeard erased by Perrault but very much present in Italian and French folk versions of the tale (1997: 124), then Breillat in fact works against these traditions.

It is thus tempting when considering *Barbe bleue*'s religious allusions, particularly in the context of Breillat's recurrent Fall metaphors, to read their significance as purely negatory. Just as *Barbe bleue* (and Breillat's *oeuvre* as a whole) resists categorization as realist or fantastical, feminist or misogynist, political or whimsical, so the use of Christian allegory works to resist metaphorical readings of women as treacherous or pure, men as Gods, Devils or fools. I would like to venture a further hypothesis though, which moves beyond Breillat's film to a wider French – and European – cinematic context.

Breillat's film is one of a significant number of European films produced in the last five or so years to incorporate a religious dimension. Many of these, post 9-11, are concerned with Islam and its representation. But there is an increasing body of works which allude to Christian stories and iconography. In some cases, it is less a case of allusion and more of outright statement: we might think here of Xavier Beauvois' *Des Hommes et des dieux/Of Gods and Men* (2010), Bruno Dumont's *Hadewijch* (2009), Jessica Hausner's *Lourdes* (2009) and Philip Gröning's *Die GroßeStille/Into Great Silence* (2005). In others, the religious reference points are more subtle, or less resonant of a set of values or meanings: Rachid Bouchareb's *London River* (2009), Götz Spielmann's *Revanche* (2008) and Mia Hansen-Løve's *Le père de mes enfants/The Father of My Children* (2009) all stand alongside *Barbe bleue* as works which make visual or thematic reference to the Christian Church, its stories and its symbols, without offering commentary or allegorical significance. These films are not *about* Christianity, and they are certainly not *Christian films*. Rather their collective gesture seems to be one of acknowledgement and incorporation, drawing on Christian myth in much the same way as one might draw on fairy tales: as a shared reference point of sorts. This may be coincidence; or it may just allude to the emergence of a new – if not movement – then at least interest in Christianity as a source of visual and thematic material, one which is causally linked to the increased media coverage of other religions and a concomitant curiosity about Europe's religious histories and traditions (and those of the West more generally).

CONCLUSION: EVER AFTER ...?

The religious historian Wendy Doniger (1998: 2) describes a myth as

> a story that is sacred to and shared by a group of people who find their most important meanings in it; it is a story believed to have been composed in the past about an event in the past, or, more rarely, in the

> future, an event that continues to have meaning in the present because it is remembered.

Again writing of religious stories, S. Brent Plate (Plate 2008: 16) has claimed that

> Myths are myths for a reason: they present a fascinating, alternative world to the one that their receivers are presently living in. These other worlds tell of the beginnings of the known world, or of heroes who inspire contemporary behaviour … the watching of these mythological stories creates a primal response on the part of the viewers, who throughout the history of the world have responded to such mythological structures by creating performative rituals that re-enact the old stories and make them new in the present age.

What is important to Plate and Doniger alike is that a definition of religious myth must deal with the ways in which myths function, how they do what they do and how they do them to people. In his 2008 study *Religion and Film*, Plate makes the case for understanding Christian myth and the cinema as phenomena which both work on their receivers through a practice of repetition, retelling and transcendence: that is to say that both operate on a level that is beyond the 'straightforwardly' intellectual. For Plate, one must be both an onlooker and a participant in film and religion in order to enter into that world; what this generally entails is a relinquishing of control of the dividing line between the world on-screen/altar and the world as it seems to exist in the here and now.

I would hazard that this synergy between film and myth extends not only to Christian stories, but to fairy tales as well. Indeed, Breillat's *Barbe bleue* takes pains to depict both the ritualistic character of fairy tales and the breaking down of the real-world/story-world binary through the use of her framing device. The relationship between Breillat's film and Christian mythology is thus not limited to the realm of the story and the symbolic. It also extends to the film's structure. It is made clear to us that for the young Catherine (Marilou Lopes-Benites) and Marie-Anne (Lola Giovannetti) the reading of Bluebeard is an oft-performed ritual: 'I will read', states Catherine, as her sister sighs, 'Again?' The more reluctant of the two girls to re-read a story that she regards as frightening, Marie-Anne chivvies her sister along, urging her to skip over the lavish descriptions of Marie-Catherine's life in Bluebeard's castle (the narrative seems to accede to these demands). As the film reaches its dramatic climax, moreover, Breillat's film enacts the breaking down of 'myth' world and 'real world' by substituting the actress playing Catherine (Lopes-Benites) for the older actress playing Marie-Catherine (Lola Créton). So it is the small, red-headed 6-year-old and not the nubile adolescent that we see enter Bluebeard's dungeon to discover the hanging corpses of his three previous wives. Through her ritual performance of the fairy tale, Catherine is able to enter the mythical world, albeit one that bears traces of her imaginative reconstitution of the Ur-story (the corpses, wax-like, pristine; the blood a fresh, pillar-box red pool). And yet the logic of the film's structure places the existence of the original myth as antecedent to its telling by Catherine; that is, we are introduced to the story world before we are introduced to the frame.

The origins of what we are seeing remain unclear, mysterious. But the durability and impact of myth is tangible. In both its narrative and form, then, Breillat's *Barbe bleue* evokes the lasting hold that Europe's foundational myths – both those of fairy tales and those of the Christian faith – have over

us. As such, it suggests that it is perhaps time for not only film, but also its theorists, to offer both re-articulations and re-examinations of these myths.

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SUGGESTED CITATION

Wheatley, C. (2013), 'The new Eve: Faith, femininity and the fairy tale in Catherine Breillat's *Barbe bleue/Bluebeard* (2009)', *Studies in European Cinema*, 10: 1, pp. 71–80, doi: 10.1386/seci.10.1.71_1

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